MOVED ANY MOUNTAINS LATELY?
Matthew 17:14-20
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On February 11, 1861, Abraham Lincoln stood in the Springfield Railroad station to depart for Washington. He was surrounded by his friends, colleagues, neighbors who came to see him off. He said: "I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will be well. To His care commending you, as I hope your prayers will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell."

Lincoln's public utterances consistently included references to God and allusions to His will: so much so that Elton Trueblood has written an excellent little book under the title, Abraham Lincoln, Theologian of American Anguish. Trueblood traces Lincoln's spiritual pilgrimage and identifies the consistent motif of trust in God's providence and dependence on God's will throughout. His feelings about slavery, some have suggested, were political and pragmatic. Trueblood argues, however, that they were moral and theological. In an almost mystical sense Lincoln believed that the institution was wrong and in opposition to God's will. And he was confident that the Divine Reality which stood behind the whole universe would prevail, if men had the courage to act on their best and noblest ideals. Lincoln was anything but an arrogant man: he was tormented by the pain of war and the bitterness of his colleagues' criticism. But on the basis of his deepest religious convictions he knew the cause was just, and that right would prevail. And a mountain was moved.

Our text this morning is one of those Biblical incidents which has entered the common vocabulary and become a kind of all-purpose, religious cliche. "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains." A popular item of women's jewelry not long ago was the lowly mustard seed. And part of the folk wisdom of American culture, a healthy dose of which my father administered to me on a daily basis, is that "you can do anything you want if you want it badly enough."

is that true? →

The curious thing about the text is that although it is a popular cliche not much has been written about it that is grounded in sound scholarship. I expected to encounter pages of commentary in studying the text: instead I discovered a few paragraphs. I found the same scholarly and homiletic reticense when I checked my resources for what other men have had to say about the text. My authorities, at least, have ignored it. Part of the reason, I have concluded, is that the text has been so terribly abused and mutilated by those who preach that Christian faith is simply the means to accomplish whatever you wish to accomplish. And part is the old problem of literalism. After having been burned a few times when we discovered that many people remain Biblical literalists, we preachers learn to avoid those texts in which the issue is likely to emerge. The problem here is that if you are going to talk and think about this text you can't ignore that issue. And so I won't. I do not believe that Jesus meant to be undertsood literally. I do not think that His idiom was one of landscape engineering. I cannot believe that He wanted His followers to think that they could rearrange the physical terrain by faith alone. I think the statement is very good hyperbole: a pregnant statement, the meaning of which will never be clear so long as we insist on taking it literally.

The context, as always, is important. Jesus and several of His disciples had just come down from the mountain on which they had experienced a very moving confirmation of their intuition about who He was. The event is known as the

Transfiguration; a mysterious and magnificent religious experience. On the mountain they knew He was the Christ. Now, back down in the valley where people were, they had encountered a frantic father, an epileptic boy and their own impotence to do anything about it. That is the situation which precipitated the statement about the mustard seed and faith moving a mountain. The object, in fact, was the little boy, not a mountain. The framework is God's will, not the superficial preference for the location of a particular hill. The product was something He wanted desperately to call out of His friends: something called faith. If you have it, He was saying, even a little bit of it, some momentous things are going to happen. In fact, you will do some things that seem impossible.

He was, that is to say, redefining the word "faith" as the power to do things that God wants done in His world. It might be helpful at this point to look at some of the ways the word is defined in the popular idiom. Faith, for many people, seems to be unquestioning acceptance of certain authoritative ideas which have been passed down through the generations. Or as an adolescent once wrote, "Faith is believing what you know isn't true." For a substantial portion of the people faith implies the temporary shutting down of the intellect: the cessation of critical and rational thought: the turning back of the clock and calendar to the time when things were simpler and God was in His heaven and all seemed right with His world. No one who is intellectually alive doesn't experience spiritual nostalgia: we know exactly what Gamaliel Bradford meant when he wrote in Exit God:

> "So our father's God was real
> Something they almost saw,
> Which kept them to a stern ideal
> And scourged them into awe...
> I sometimes wish that God were back
> In this dark world and wide:
> For though some virtues he might lack,
> He had his pleasant side."
>
> (Exit God, in Shadow Verses).

It won't work any longer. Faith that is to be taken seriously today must be intellectually tough, open to the most difficult questions. It can never again be blind acceptance.

For others faith means having all the answers. Doubt becomes the enemy. Regardless of the problem, faith has the solution with a series of Biblical texts as proof. Nels Ferre, in the Finality of Faith, has written, "This is a contradiction in terminology. The man who has all the answers doesn't have faith at all, he has knowledge. He doesn't need faith." Faith, according to Ferre, is the opposite. It is the ability to live confidently and peacefully without having all the answers.

For other people faith means believing certain doctrinal ideas about God, Jesus and humanity. "The Christian faith" means orthodox Christian theology. Now we Presbyterians have been doing theology for a long time: we love it: we value it: we sometimes describe the highest purpose of the church in terms of teaching people to think theologically. But we must be very careful. Jesus, apparently, spent no time at all talking theology. He required no examination in doctrine before inviting people to be His disciples. Theology may undergird faith: it may nourish faith - but we are on thin ice indeed when we define faith as believing that certain ideas are true.

Unfortunately, Jesus never defined the word. The New Testament uses it 250 times and assumes, I believe, that we will learn what it means by looking at Jesus. His definition was His own life - and if I may presume for a moment - this is how I interpret. Faith is an undying trust in God's faithfulness. It is an unshakeable confidence that God's will is working its way in history and that it will prevail. And it is behavior, a life - if you will, lived out of that trust and confidence.

The New Testament is far more interested in behavior than theories. Now, precisely at this point, the text becomes problematic. It seems, at first brush, to be saying that faith will help you do whatever you want to do. And there is no doubt that confidence, self-confidence, is a vital ingredient in any kind of successful venture.

Several Saturdays ago two football teams did something which, by anyone's calculations, they should not have been able to do. Notre Dame annihilated a very good Southern Cal team: prior to the game they were sung Irish ballads about men on the gallows for "the wearin' of the green": they were reminded daily that they could do it: moments before the kickoff they were issued green jerseys, for the first time in fourteen years. When they took the field they were a better team than they had thought before. They won. The same thing happened between Michigan and Minnesota. Self-confidence is the vital ingredient in successful ventures - even football games.

Norman Vincent Peale has become one of the legendary Christian preachers and authors of our generation. He is not a theologian or a Biblical scholar. His genius is in talking about self-confidence, or the power of positive thinking. Robert Schuller,at the mammoth and enormously successful Garden Grove Community Church in California is the hottest item on the religious market today - because he talks about "Possibility Thinking". Over and over again he tells the millions of people who listen to him - "With God you can do anything." The trouble with that is that people hear the possibility but not the "with God" part.

I don't think Jesus meant that you can do whatever you set out to do if you are pious about it. Self-confidence may help you a great deal: it may enable you to do more than you are doing. But God must be offended to be treated as a celestial errand boy who may be summoned to assist in winning football games and earning millions of dollars.

The power and goodness of the idea so successfully represented by Peale and Schuller, however, derives from the fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has, too frequently, been on the other side of the ledger. We have preached sinfulness so eloquently that people haven't heard the good news about redemption. We have pounded away at human inadequacy so consistently that people have not heard the good news about human worth and the New Being in Christ. We have talked about the fall of man and allowed the secular philosophers to monopolize his dignity. We have made people feel so bad about their sexuality, that we are no longer even invited to be part of the discussion of morality. The Christian Church has aided, for too long, the process of heaping guilt and feelings of worthlessness on the corporate back of humanity. And we are indicted by the emergence of something called the Human Potential Movement outside the Church. We should be the resident experts in human potential: our Lord said we could move mountains.

The text speaks eloquently to our situation and to each of us personally. One of the major motifs of our day is the sense of powerlessness. Rollo May has written that the most pervasive tendency for modern man is to see himself the victim of forces which are out of his control. Personally, we have taught that we are the product of deep, subconscious drives. Politically, we are victims of grand global forces over which we have no control whatever. He writes, "It is this inner experience of impotence which constitutes our critical problem." (Love and Will,p.184).

The nuclear age is a kind of symbol of the demise of the individual. The existence of weapons capable of ending all human life has diminshed - almost entirely - the confidence of the individual to influence what happens to him.

The result - a pervasive cynicism: an apathy that could allow a Watergate, for instance, because it was so big and powerful and out of control that the individual simply was without influence: a skepticism about government at all levels and a refusal even to participate in the elective process because "what can one person do?" We encounter it even in ourselves: "what's the use in trying:I am who I am and why bother being any different?"

Cynicism about the individual's ability to do anything is the endemic disease of our age. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ must encounter that directly. We have been seduced into expecting too little of ourselves: and we have forgotten almost entirely that we follow a Lord who suggested that, within the will of God, we can move mountains.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ stands on the incredible premise that God created men and women in His own image: a little lower than the angels. It defines the human dilemma as a consistent refusal to live up to that; an unwillingness to be as big or as much as the Creator intended. Our sin is pride - but it is also sloth which means simply the moral laziness which refuses to be as whole as God created us to be. The Gospel suggests that we are worth the very life of God's son: that our dignity is granted in His death for us: that He calls us to share with Him the continuing creation of the world and the reconciliation of all its people. Faith means acting as if you believed that. If we're interested in faith at all we ought to be venturing something, doing something which seems impossible, and counting on God to be with us. That's how the Bible has it. People of faith in the Bible are those who venture: those who see a vision of God's will and then, with all the confidence in the world, put their lives on the line to accomplish the task.

That's how it has been consistently across the centuries of Christian experience. The disciples were bewildered at the demands He made of them: how could they live up to His expectations? They couldn't even heal this little boy. But they did it: they became more than they thought they could: they invaded and conquered an empire and turned human history upside down. The Reformers, four and half centuries ago, had nothing going for them but the confidence that God's will would be done. And they moved a mountain. Thirty-five years ago racial segregation was a social and legal fact of life throughout much of the nation. That was a big mountain - but it was moved.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ promises that mountains will be moved: it tells you and me that we matter, that we count, that our influence will be limited only by our courage: that, within the will of God, we can do far more than we might expect.

Jesus said: "Use what you have. Don't wait for more. Don't spend your life waiting for some grand, dramatic experience in which you will be given a strong and overwhelming faith. Use what you have: even if it's no larger than a mustard seed, it will be enough."

The mountains about which we do most of our worrying: the mountains which seem most immovable are intimate and personal. We need the assurance that we count politically, economically, socially. But our needs are greatest and our pain sharpest in the intimacy of personal life. It is there that we doubt: it is in the heart that we aren't sure we can meet the expectations of others. The biggest mountains are invisible to everyone else. I see a bit of them every day: the person waging secret, and life and death war on alcohol: the young man on drugs and looking for some reason not to be: the homemaker wondering what's to become of her dignity and identity when the last child moves away: the executive passed over for promotion and frightened to strike out again: the widow, suddenly and without warning left absolutely alone and wondering how in the world she will survive: the heart patient wondering whether the adjustments can be made and whether they're worth it: the chemotherapy patient, sick at heart and body and not certain that tomorrow will be worth the bother: the young couple with a heavy load of problems and no way even to talk about them anymore. Somewhere you and I are in the picture, or a similar picture. There is a mountain for each of us which seems immovable. Somewhere in each of us is an instinct to let it stand there; to recede into the safety of cynicism. And somewhere in each of us there is a better instinct: an impatience with the status quo: a lingering suspicion that we can do it. I believe that better instinct is of God. I believe He gave it to us and keeps it alive in us. I believe that is what Jesus Christ addressed when He said: "You can do it: use what you have: venture it: if you have faith as big as a mustard seed you can say to this hill, 'go from here to there', and it will go. You could do anything."

Amen.

Father, we confess our fears and our preference for comfort. Give us faith to venture: to move the mountains that need moving: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.